

PROFESSIONAL ECONOMISTS IN GOVERNMENT:
ASSESSING THE USE OF ORAL HISTORY AS A SOURCE OF EVIDENCE

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Economic historians studying the professional development of economists in government are often required to examine the social processes involved in governmental decision-making.¹ The importance of personal relationships and professional pressures in the final policy outcome must be determined. Here, as elsewhere in the sociology of normative economics, use of oral history as a source of evidence may be beneficial. Allen (1977) demonstrates the utility of interviewing participants in discussing

...*what* was done by the economist in government, under what *circumstances*, for what *audiences*, subject to what *constraints*, with what *analytics*, with what evident *impact*. (pp. 49-50)

Further, interviewing present and retired government economists about the development of their employment roles and their growing self-awareness as professionals may allow us better to understand the proliferation of economists in government.² If this technique is to be used in the sociology of normative economics, an adequate understanding of its methodology is required.

In traditional societies, oral history has been the main vehicle by which social groups have recorded history.³ During the nineteenth century however, orthodox historians in western societies moved away from the reliance on oral history and the use of oral evidence as an additional data aid and have introduced the documentary method. Increased reliance on the documentary method offered advantages for the emerging discipline.⁴ The discipline had a distinctive method which could be used to exclude non-orthodox historians. It allowed a degree of objective neutrality to be claimed by the orthodox historian, at the same time enhancing claims towards social applicability. Finally, it aided the training of neophytes by providing an explicit methodology to be mastered.⁵

As the history profession developed, less emphasis was placed on the need to learn skills necessary for inter-communication, particularly between the historians and their subject. The validity of using documents as primary evidence remained as long as communication occurred solely through written means. Often, the validity of the documents used was not questioned. Usually, the following questions were not raised: Who wrote them? What was the writer's place in the social structure? What was the writer's reason for writing?

Communication in the twentieth century has largely been dominated by non-written forms of communication, e.g. the telephone. No longer do people record the majority of their communications in documentary form. To understand the past it is necessary to synthesise many sources of evidence. The growing awareness of the importance of using the oral history technique represents part of this synthesis. Its adoption in the history of economic thought has been recently urged in both Klamer (1984) and Colander (1987).⁶ Its limited use in the sociology of normative economics leaves one apprehensive about its applicability. The following provides a case study of oral history use in the sociology of normative economics within the context of oral history methodology.

Recent historiography has taken advantage of the oral history technique. While this has increasingly involved non-professional historians in the writing of history, it has also highlighted the diversity of views that the professional historian has had to reconcile.⁷ Tamke (1977) comments:

Oral history (also) points up the untidy diversity of human experience. Individuals experience their lives selectively — that is, they consciously and unconsciously select experiences on the basis of individually felt needs as well as shared cultural ideas. (p. 270)

Oral history can be used to correct and supplement existing sources of evidence and open up new problems for consideration.⁸ Interviews recognise the fact that people involved in the making of history can impart masses of information about themselves (Ackroyd and Hughes 1981, p. 69). It is under this pretence that Allen (1977) attempts to describe through the incorporation of oral history '...what working economists...*actually do* in government...' (emphasis added, 1977, p. 49). Unfortunately, while Allen does address the problems of constraints on professional economists — e.g. audiences, time, cooperation with non-professionals — he provides little analysis of the answers elicited.

No doubt conscious (and/or unconscious) decisions have been made by Allen in order to present professional economists as relatively homogeneous in their experiences of government employment (despite his statement to the contrary; footnote p. 50).⁹ The statements appear consistent with each other. But consistency is only one possible feature apparent in oral history and is not strictly necessary. One can distinguish between the concepts of reliability and validity.

Reliability: the consistency with which an informant tells the same story over time.

Validity: the degree of conformity between reports of the event and the event recorded in other sources.¹⁰

Reliability is a *sufficient* but *not a necessary* condition in determining the 'usefulness' of oral evidence. An unreliable informant may lead the interviewer to question the reason for such inconsistencies, e.g. unconscious mental repression of a distasteful experience. The existence of such inconsistencies can be an important point in itself. Traditionally, the validity of an informant's report has determined the extent to which oral evidence has been used in the writing of history. However, it is quite conceivable (and, in the analysis of social processes, possible) that an informant can be reliable and yet invalid. In this situation, the interviewer may be led to question the reliability of other evidence.¹¹

A more important lacuna in Allen's paper is the lack of explicit awareness regarding the psychological aspects of oral history. While it is tenable that interviews with participants about recent events need to address this problem less directly, cognitive reaction upon information occurs no matter what time spans are involved. The participant reacted subjectively in the initial registration of an event. Further, in the elicitation of information by the interviewer, the participant's reactions are affected by many factors, e.g. memory loss, question directions, the interview process. Arguments against the use of oral history as an evidentiary source highlight the difficulties of preventing inaccuracies in memory recall. Closer analysis of the process of memory recall may answer such fears. The human memory covers a complex group of mental activities and is difficult to accurately define. Three essential activities need to be established:

-registration: to be able to establish a record of an experience in the nervous system.

-retention: the persistence of the experience.

-recall: to be able to report consciously the previously registered experience.¹²

Recall is the only observable facet of the memory process. Further, anything that diminishes the consciousness of the interviewee will affect the registration component of the memory. When an interviewee recalls an experience, we know that the experience must have been perceived and reacted upon cognitively (i.e. studied by the memory, compared with other experiences). This same process occurs when the interviewer comes to analyze the information obtained from the interviewee. The oral history technique merely allows a more explicit recognition of the general problem of memory loss that affects all adults. Oral historians have attempted to address the problem of memory loss by using orientation points during the interview. These may be in the form of old documents or reference to important events that open up further memories or clarify other experiences alluded to previously (Misztal 1981, p. 186; Lindquist 1979, p. 27; Thompson 1978, p. 119). They are successful because the memory recall process is determined by the associative properties of the memory. The memory registers an experience and links it with other events. When interviewing an elderly person, for example, the interviewee will have difficulty in arranging events in a life cycle. The elderly interviewee does not have an impaired memory but merely has a less efficient retrieval mechanism. The interviewee's interest in the subject being studied can be the most important factor contributing to the accuracy of memory recall.

It is important to recognise that the interview is a social encounter and as such can not be exempt from normal social processes.¹³ During the interview these can derive from two sources -- environment, and interviewer interaction. The environment places certain constraints upon the interviewee. The home reinforces pressures of 'respectable' home-centred ideas. The workplace emphasises the influences of work conventions and attitudes, while 'public bars' encourage dare-devilry (Thompson 1978, p. 119). The influences of environmental factors may be reduced through careful selection of the interview setting and ensuring that the interviewee is mentally comfortable.

The interview process is necessarily dialectic. The interviewers impose a structure of thought on the interviewees, the interviewees having to reorganise their perceptions along lines defined by the interviewers (Friedlander 1984, p. 137; Colander 1987, p. 969). Another selective bias has entered the formation of evidence. But in this case the interviewers are attempting to be objective, and their selectivity should be identifiable in the editing and exposition of the oral history transcript.

Allen's success in providing an overview of reflections by professional economists can hardly be questioned given his own brief, which concentrates on what economists do. His desire was to interview economists at a lower level in the administration and yet still talk with economists operational in governmental policymaking. One can also view Allen's paper as providing one with an opportunity to examine the implicit methodological questions involved in the oral history technique. To historians of economics interested in the sociology of normative economics Allen's paper can be seen as a comment upon attitudes towards professional economists (i.e. seeing the paper as an *object*) or as providing professional economist's views about their government employment (where the economists are the *object*).

With better understanding of methodological distinctions in oral history, historians of economics may introduce the technique as a legitimate source of evidence in the sociology of normative economics, particularly in ascertaining the professional self-awareness of economists, their attitudes towards other professionals and attitudes towards the bureaucracy in which they work. Often research in this field is constrained socially and legally. Historians of economics have much to gain by being aware and ready to accept alternative sources of evidence. Such attempts, as seen in Allen (1977), should be aware of the methodological problems inherent in the dialectical nature of the interview process.

NOTES

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1. The research field of professional economists in government was first suggested by Coats (1978). Study in this field shall be referred to as the sociology of normative economics.

2. Coats argues that '...special attention must be given to the opportunity, at least for recent periods, to interview economists about their working experiences, an opportunity which is too often beyond the bounds of the historian's possibilities.' (1978, p. 313).
3. For a discussion of the use of oral history in early societies, Vansina, J. (1965), particularly Chapter 6, pp. 141-182.
4. One could view the emerging history discipline as an emerging academic profession. The definition of a profession takes many guises. For a 'conventional' definition, cf. Parsons, T. (1968). A 'core' of attributes can be distilled from the sociology of professions literature; cf. Millerson (1964, p.5). The three attributes 1) the training and certification of neophytes, 2) claiming a domain of specific social enquiry for the discipline, and 3) fostering a reputation of objective neutrality rather than partisanship, are included in this core.
5. In contrast to these reasons for adopting a documentary method, Levine (1986, p. 105), with specific reference to Britain, focuses on the preservation of documents in the Public Records Office and the restrictions later placed upon them, as an instrumental move to champion such a method.
6. Klammer notes 'Most people answer questions by reading and deducing attitudes and intentions from the written word. Why not talk directly with the people whose intentions and judgements one is trying to guess?' (1984, p.x). Interviews through written means were recently used in Weintraub (1983, pp. 1,37-39) and (1985 Chapter Six). Allen (1977) and Sargent (1973) provide testimony to the possible enlightenment available from oral history.
7. The popular wave of oral history over the last fifteen years is paralleled by an increased fascination with nostalgia. According to Ryant (1982, p. 62), fascination with nostalgia can be analysed sociologically as a manifestation of a sensed threat to an individual's/group's security. The use of oral history in investigating popular culture, as advocated by Tanke (1977), could itself be viewed as a form of popular culture; see Ryant 1982, p. 60.

8. An implicit assumption here is that the subject being studied is not so far removed from the present that individuals involved in the subject are still alive, or that well-informed relatives are still alive.
9. An important feature of oral history is that it allows an explicit recognition of the inherent bias in evidence collection. In the oral history literature this is a well supported attribute, for example Thompson (1972, p. 4; 1978, p. 94), Menninger (1975, p. 73), Grele (1975, pp. 290, 293).
10. These definitions correspond to those used by Hoffman (1984, p. 69).
11. On calls for reliability and validity, Hoffman (1984, p. 69), Cutler (1984, p. 83), Moss (1984, pp. 99-100), Thompson (1978, pp. 210-11). Thompson recognises the distinctions made in the above discussion between reliability and validity.
12. This part of my discussion draws on Menninger (1975, pp. 69-73).
13. One can view an interview as a 'speech event', focusing on the exchange between speakers, e.g. how they choose their topics and change their language given different participants and environment, and how others react to them Gumprez (1972, pp. 17-18); Brown and Fraser (1979, particularly pp. 45-58).

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